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Soviets Believe U.S. Will Invade Iran

Ultra-secret Soviet intelligence cables intercepted by the National Security Agency disclose that the Russian leaders have believed since at least July that the United States is planning an invasion of Iran.

And the movement of Soviet troops and weapons in recent months demonstrates that the Kremlin is prepared to intervene militarily in the event of an American move.

Following the April rescue mission fiasco, the Soviets warned the United States that they would not sit idly by if we threatened military action against Iran. Intelligence sources confirm that the Russians have put their muscle where their mouth was in the months since then, and are now poised to move into Iran at the first provocation.

[In a statement over the weekend, the White House said:

"Jack Anderson's latest column alleging that the U.S. plans to attack Iran and that Soviet leaders believe in the seriousness of such plans is as false, grotesque, and irresponsible as were his columns a month ago on the same subject. The latest charges are complete inventions, which can only damage efforts to obtain the prompt and safe release of the American hostages in Iran and the prospects for peace in that region. What is true, however, is that Soviet propaganda has exploited Anderson's similar false allegations to inspire anti-American sentiments in Iran and elsewhere to prolong the hostage crisis and construct pretexts for aggressive Soviet actions."

Heavily coded cables from Russia to its Warsaw Pact allies have warned them to be prepared for a military confrontation in Iran. The KGB's "best estimate," according to the cables, was

that the United States was getting ready for military action, and the Soviets would have to meet force with force.

The NSA is convinced that the Soviet communications it has been intercepting are genuine, not a "disinformation" ruse intended to be picked up by U.S. intelligence.

According to top secret Defense Department documents, the Red Army has shifted significant numbers of men and materiel from Europe to the Iran region since the first of the year. As early as January, nearly half the Soviet strength in western Afghanistan had been deployed near the Iranian border—some as close as 12 miles from the frontier. Many of the troops are still there.

Drawing mainly from the 103 Soviet divisions facing NATO at the beginning of 1980, and from other mobile divisions, the Russians now have at least 23 divisions in position to move into Iran. Under a 1921 treaty, the Soviets have a right to intervene in Iran, and though the Iranian government abrogated the treaty last year, the Kremlin does not recognize that unilateral action.

What has alarmed U.S. analysts more than the quantity of the Soviet buildup near Iran is the quality of the forces arrayed there. An ominous example is the withdrawal of nuclear howitzers and mortars from the NATO front to the Iranian borders.

Other disturbing evidence is the presence of the Russians' new, top-of-the-line SA11 tactical surface-to-air missiles near Iran. Experts doubt that the Soviets would deploy most of their SA11s to their southern borders—weakening the defenses against China and NATO—unless they seriously ex-

pected a military confrontation in Iran.

Lending support to the interpretation that the Kremlin believes a U.S. invasion is planned is the fact that the weaponry being deployed near Iran is primarily defensive in nature. This indicates the Russians are preparing for counterattack rather than an invasion of their own.

Still, some experts warn, it is possible the Russians are setting up an excuse for an Afghanistan-style aggression.

While there is no disagreement in the intelligence community that U.S. military action in Iran might bring a Soviet armed response, there have been differing estimates of the kind and degree of the response. A recent Defense Intelligence Agency analysis warned that a nuclear confrontation could be expected—albeit tactical, not strategic. But by the time this reached the president's desk, it had been watered down to the possibility of a major air and ground assault. The CIA was more optimistic, warning only that Soviet intervention could not be ruled out.